December '97 Volume 1.3

GLBTAA Voice

GAY LESBIAN BI AND TRANSGENDERED AFRICAN AMERICAN VOICE

BEKA'S CORNER

What's Up Wid Dat?

There's a dilemma in the African American gay, les, bi, trans community that has come to my attention; inner cultural discrimination.

Is it in our communities best interest to double card a lesbian sister when she comes to the door of a predominantly gay male dance club? And when a male to female transgender sister or female to male transgender brother walks into our midst, who are we trying to impress by playing the game of more normal than thou? Must we be reminded that we are discriminated against daily, not only by the majority culture for not having white skin, but by the majority sexual minorities culture as well for not fitting into their politically correct mold of upper middle class, lily white gay man or lesbian woman. And if you are bi or transgendered, forget it, we are told, you don't fit anywhere. Don't we realize that when these communities see us discriminating against our own, they revel in the disunity we breed?

The time has come for our community to take stock of this self- destructive behavior and implement immediate steps to remedy the situation. If we do not, the freedom we struggle for will become an exercise in futility.

Rebecca Weems

LOOK WHO'S READING?

With winter upon us, now is a great time to start mulling over the book shelves for our cold winter night reading selections. This month in San Francisco, kicks off our cities annual book fair, which brings in thousands of book publishers, authors, and interested readers. With all of this literary activity going on, I couldn't think of a more fitting individual to kick off our November issue than Bernard Henderson, owner of the The Book House, or TBH, as it is known by thousands of African American same gender loving readers. As you will read in the following interview Bernard has created a mail order house that features hundreds of titles written for, by and about us. It is the hope of GLBTAA Voice that our interview with Bernard will encourage you to investigate the astronomical amount of literature available that has been written and published by members of our community.

THE BOOK HOUSES
BERNARD HENDERSON

Rodney- Good afternoon, Bernard.

Bernard- Hello Rodney.

Rodney- You are owner of "The Bookhouse", which is a mail order book company for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered African American people. What was your inspiration for developing The Bookhouse?

Bernard- I like to read, first of all, and the type of books I liked to read were scattered around in different book stores. That's when I came up with the idea to set up shop where our community could have access to a variety of materials written by it's member's.

Rodney- When did you start The Bookhouse?

Bernard- June, 1990. I remember writing that date down and folding it together so I would never forget it.

Rodney- Sounds like a proud moment for you?

Bernard- Oh yeah, I felt good about it. The concept for the company was formed before June though. At that time, I only had the books that I had read to begin with, which was only about fifteen or twenty.

Rodney- What has the reception been from the community?

Bernard- Everywhere I've been, people see it as a great idea. I receive, maybe, three to five phone calls a week for a catalog from various countries, including Canada and Australia. They know about The Bookhouse!

Rodney- Must have been a lot of marketing going on?

Bernard- Yes, there has been. I traveled around, at the beginning of this year, to all the conferences, all the major events involving our community, such as the Leadership Forum in Long Beach, Beach Boy Pride, Atlanta Pride, Dallas Pride, Chicago Pride, New York Pride, (laughter) you know, hittin' every major event and puttin' myself out there.

Rodney- What have been some of the obstacles you've had to overcome since becoming an entrepreneur?

Bernard- I received a lot of negative responses from our community when I first started. Questions like; Are there enough gay, lesbian, bi, and transgender books written by African Americans to even have a book company? How many African American gay, lesbian, bi and transgendered persons have books published that I could sell? A lot of people said they thought it was not a good idea. Those people, I didn't focus on. I would have to say money, or a lack thereof, has been the only obstacle, after I quit my job and worked on The Bookhouse full-time.

Rodney- Have you a plan for moving into a more marketing and development direction for The Bookhouse?

Bernard- Hey, I got a job! (laughter). And am lovin' the work I do, and making a decent salary. Enough to live off of, and enough to give a little to the company. Doing it all on all on my own, has taught me patience and discipline. I guess I could have solicited other investor's, but with investor's come other voices, other ideas. I'm not saying I'm not open to other ideas, but this is my baby. I started it, and I want to see it through to the end. So if I'm a little broke this year, I'll cut back on things I don't need, like smoking(laughter),the things that I can live without. Then, I can put that money into the company.

Rodney- Who inspires you most to keep working at developing The Bookhouse?

Bernard- My friends. I have good friends. I become discouraged at times, especially because I don't have any money. They encourage me to keep going because the money will come, and because there is an interest in what I am doing. The mail order business is slowly but gradually building, but I want to do more than just mail-order. When I initially started the company, the mail-order business was the start up idea. Okay, here is a mail-order company where the community knows it can get the reading materials it wants, this would automatically roll over into me opening an actual bookstore. That's my ultimate goal, to own a bookstore.

Rodney- In what direction do you see publishing going as far as African American gay, lesbian, bi and transgendered literature?

Bernard- I think it's time we created and published our own literature and not leave it to other's to define who we are, i.e. G.B. Mann, and K. Rydell Watson, but we have to do it in a community sort of way. We have to find member's of our community with stories to tell that are ready to have them published, and make a publishing house

Rodney- Do you think African American gay, lesbian, bi and transgender fiction is becoming more mainstream?

Bernard- Yeah, with the help of James Earl Hardy and E. Lynn Harris. E. Lynn Harris started introducing our stories to the mainstream, and it's taken off from there. With our stories, there is an interest because there aren't many of us telling our stories in the mainstream, so there's an interest in our lifestyle, how we live, how we survive. People want to hear our stories from us.

Rodney- Do you think whites are becoming more interested in our work?

Bernard- Of course! Of course! James, when B Boy Blues came out, had no other place to go but to white audiences. They bought close to 200,000 copies. I would say it was the white audience that contributed the bulk of the sales because that's where we were, out in their community talking about the first love story about black men loving each other from a street perspective.

Rodney- One of the questions I've been asked is why haven't we received similar support from the African American gay, lesbian, bi and transgendered community that we have received from the white community and if this is so, what can The Bookhouse do to change that?

Bernard- This is true. To change that, The Bookhouse offers an environment of familiarity. Why should I attend a reading in a bookstore that only sells, maybe, two or three of my books, or that doesn't cater to my community. That's where The Bookhouse Cafe comes in, giving our community a place where we can go and read,/hear about ourselves and our history.

Rodney- Do you think, with the success of The Bookhouse, that African American gay, lesbian, bi and transgendered people prefer buying books through mail-order rather than in a bookstore?

Bernard- As I said earlier, where we go stems from the ability of the bookstore to make us feel comfortable. If a bookstore offers the affirmation we seek, then we will shop at that bookstore. Of course, there will be people that are apprehensive about going into a gay bookstore, but those are people who are afraid to be themselves.

Rodney- Do you think our community members are reading more?

Bernard- We've always read! It's just never talked about! We've always read the white stories, 'cause that's all we've had to read! We've allowed white people to tell us that we don't read. But I've always had friends that read. We always converse about the stories in different books, so I don't know where the lie about we don't read came from, 'cause we do read and we do buy books! Lots of them!

Rodney- What frustrates you about having to shatter the myth that we don't read?

Bernard- Yeah. Getting us to talk about who we are, where we are, and what we are doing. The white community needs to know that we exist, not in their shadow, but in our own right. And we need to see each other living positively as a community. That is what The Bookhouse Cafe is going to be about, a positive environment for our community to gather and support each other. We will be employing members from our own community, so we can help keep each other employed, that is the truest form of

Rodney- Do you have any views on how to market our books?

Bernard- Yes! Marketing African American gay, lesbian, bi and transgender literature is marketing to our community. And if you aren't African American gay, lesbian, bi or transgendered, you can't really do that, because of your limited access to our real community.

Rodney- Do you plan to write a book yourself?

Bernard- Definitely! There are thoughts in that direction. Weighin' it out! Weighin' it out! But I think, right now, I have so many other things goin' on, that me writin' a book is on the back burner. But it may happen eventually. My idea right now is to find people who already have books they want published. Especially our youngsters. I think it is important for them to see, as a young African American gay, lesbian, bi or transgendered person that they can write a story and it can be sold. They are the key to our future, and if we take care of them, they will take care of us (laughter).

Rodney- What encouragement would you provide for other entrepreneur's from our community?

Bernard- Find something you enjoy doing, and figure out how you can make money at it! But don't go into business thinking you are just goin' to make money, it won't last. What you do has to have meaning to you! You have to have a passion about it!

Rodney- Thank you for this interview, and much success with The Bookhouse.

Bernard- Thanks for interviewing me.

Rodney- Hello Rebecca, how are you?

Rebecca- Fine Rodney, how are you today?

Rodney- Good. Good. Tell us, how did you become editor of GLBTAA Voice?

Rebecca- I think it was about six months ago, I met you, Rodney Washington after a reading at Different Lights Books. We discussed coming together to write a play. At that time, I was asked to become a part of GLBTAA Communications. The idea for the newsletter came about four months ago and you asked me to be editor in chief.

Rodney- So you write plays as well as novels and short stories?

Rebecca- Yeah. I write plays, short stories. I'm writing my second book now which is presently untitled. My next book is going to be a fictional novel about a tribe of vampires in northern Africa and how they live, their loves, their happiness and sadness. Of course one of the main character's will be a gay man or lesbian.

Rodney- That sounds interesting. What gave you the idea for such an endeavor?

Rebecca- I have a fetish for the dark side! Okay, I love vampires! I love to see their fangs, hear them speak! My fantasy is to have an irresistibly handsome vampire bite me while we make love, take me away, and make me his queen.(laughter) I don't know, I have always had a fetish for vampires. So, I thought, instead of redundantly experiencing the European version, that I would create my own.

Rodney- How do you work your characters into your stories?

Rebecca- They live in my mind! When I start writing, it's like the character's themselves come into my head. And when they do, they tell me what to say, what to write, and that's just what I do, write what they say. It always makes for a great piece.

Rodney- Do you think that's the process for most writer's?

Rebecca- I can't speak for most writer's, but I can speak for myself. I think most artist's have their own individual way of doing whatever creative endeavor their involved in. But for me, I hear the voices speak, and when they speak, I write them down.

Rodney- When did you decide to become a writer?

Rebecca- Actually, I've been writing pretty much all my life. I remember when I was a child, I would sit on my mother's bed and read. I've always been interested in the written word. But then, I went out and lived the life for a while and really didn't get into it again until about two years ago when I decided that I do have a talent for writing, and started again.

Rodney- Are there other artistic areas that you are good at or that you would like to

Rebecca- Yes! I'd like to learn to play violin, and paint. I'm also interested in learning to play piano, and sculpture.

Rodney- Lots of musical interest?

Rebecca- Yeah, there is music. I see music and writing as both universal. The letter's, the notes, all come together to form a logical/sequential form. The creative individual thinks in logical/sequential terms, with the result being, the finished product stirs the heart and mind as opposed to the redundant use of language practiced by attorney's, doctor's etc. Like when I write, the story has to come together as an entire whole, each part must relate to the whole.

Rodney- Are you currently published?

Rebecca- Yes, I self published my first book last year, which was a real accomplishment for me, entitled "Exile In Babylon". It is a book of poems about gender, the injustice of our country's political, judicial, and penal systems, and some erotica. I've kept it very simple because I wanted to reach the African American gay, lesbian, bi and transgendered community. I felt that was very important with my first book, so I didn't go through the headache of trying to find an outside publisher.

Rodney- Would you recommend self publishing for other writer's in our community?

Rebecca- Sure! If you are trying to get your work out there, self publish. That's how you meet people that could possibly be interested in your work. I mean, that's how I met you, Rodney. I wasn't looking to get rich over night, that's not how writing works and I'm not really into that anyway. Not

money, it is, but it has it's place! My creativity introduces the community to my ideas. I think we, as writer's, when we write, our ideas are going out to the larger community and writer's are who change the ideas of the world. A prime example, Baynard Rustin, the African American gay man who wrote the "I have a dream" speech for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., he changed the world through his writing! Of course, Martin gave the speech, but it was Baynard who sat down and wrote it! So we change the world as we write, and I want to be a part of the change that's happening because I feel we are going through a celestial change throughout the universe and that writing is what I have to contribute to humankind.

Rodney- Great. I'm sure being editor in chief of GLBTAA Voice, puts you in a position to expose other writer's?

Rebecca- Oh yeah! Without a doubt! As a matter of fact, I had a transgender poet call me last week and express interest in having our company publish her work. It is important that our community knows that we exist for them; to help in any capacity we can. That way, they become more interested in what we are doing.

Rodney- How does playwriting differ from writing a novel or short story?

Rebecca- Actually, it doesn't differ that much for me. When the characters come to my mind, they let me know in what form they want their story told. it's pretty much up to them. I'm just essentially a vehicle for them to speak through.

Rodney- Do you currently have a play in production?

Rebecca- Yeah, as a matter

Washington. It's called "A Certain Type O' Misundertandin". It's about how an African American family deals with their sons transgenderism. I also intend to write another play, which is at present untitled, about a male to female transgenders' experience during her stay in an all female drug and alcohol treatment facility.

Rodney- What was your life like before you started writing? Rebecca- To be quite honest, BORING! I really didn't have a life because I didn't know who I was, I didn't know who I wanted to be, I had no sense of self and that made it very difficult for me to survive The most difficult position a person can be in in this world, is not knowing who they are. It is most important that African American gay, lesbian, bi and transgendered people understand who we are, to learn, accept and utilize our own inner strength. If we don't, we're lost. I was lost, because I didn't know how to do that. Then, when I came out as a transexual person, it's like my whole being opened up, my creativity, my mind, it was like the clouds departed.

Rodney- That leads to my next question. What has your transgender journey been like?

Rebecca- Cool! Really cool! I love waking in the morning! I love feeling who I am! I love the changes that are happening to my body and mind. It's not just physical, but also a psychological experience. I have become. I am male, I am female, I am combined, I am one! I exist on an entirely different level of spirituality than most mono gendered human beings. My world is together now. No longer do I feel that I exist outside of myself looking in. I have a lot of support from my community, but most importantly, men look at me more now (smile).

Rodney- Do you encourage other transgendered people to write?

Rebecca- Oh yes! I do not want to be the only voice out here writing! I can't tell every transgender's story, there are to many individual experiences for me to ever assume that I could. Now, I wouldn't mind being a vehicle to help publish, because i feel I will be able to better understand what is being said, and I wouldn't want their stories distorted. That's not to say that my story isn't interesting, it is. But so is every other transgender story. Especially in this society, where if you're not white, anglo saxon, Protestant, and male, you're considered a outcast! The majority of people in our society are outcasts, but some don't realize it. So yes, I do encourage my sister's and brother's not only to write, but to also get out there and allow their creativity to be seen, not only as drag queens/kings, but learn to play violin, guitar, piano, flute, be a jazz singer, a public speaker, because that is how we become whole human beings! That is how we become accepted members of our society.

Rodney- What do you think the biggest obstacle is to the gay, lesbian, bi and, especially, the transgendered community as we come into the new millennium?

Rebecca- Debasing ourselves! We must overcome hating ourselves! No matter where our lives lead us, there will always be people who think of us as freaks and outsiders. Screw them! What matters is what we think about ourselves! We have to understand that whatever we have been taught about ourselves, is a lie! We must write (re-write?) our own history now!

Rodney- That brings us to our last question. If you had three wishes, what would they be?

Rebecca- Oh my god, three wishes! Why are you doing this to me, Rodney?(laughter) My first wish would be to become one of the greatest writer's in the world, to be able to influence billions of people with my thoughts and feelings. My second wish, would be to curtail the rampant political oppression that happens to people in this society. My third wish, for the rest of my life to have a real close friend. Yes, those would be my three wishes.

Rodney- I was hoping you'd say that the third would be three more wishes (laughter)

Rebecca- Ha! Ha! No, I think those three wishes, if they came true, would bring about a lot of change. But just imagine if every African American gay, lesbian, bi or trangendered person had three wishes, I'm sure one of those wishes would be society's total acceptance of us as human beings. Imagine what type of world we would live in then.

Rodney- Well, thank you for your interview. I'm sure a lot of our reader's will be very influenced.

Rebecca- I certainly hope so.

SHOPPING CART

ITEMS YOU NEED TO ADD TO YOUR BOOKSHELF,

BEKA'S PICKS.....

PUT YOUR BEST FACE FORWARD, WITH JULIEN OKWU'S "FACE FORWARD"....

Face Forward chronicles the lifes of 39 success and accomplished African American men. Julian, documents the story with sensitvity and great care. Each black and white photo accompanies a short essay on each partcipant. The author and photographer interviews black men from all walks of life, fathers, entreprenuers, authors, designers, fire fighters, visual artists, congressmen, gay, straight and all spectrums in between. Julien was featured recently on the Oprah Winfrey show, and is a San Francisco native. Copies of Face Forward are available directly through GLBTAA Communications, for $19.95. Send your check or money order to GLBTAA Communications, in care of Rodney Washington: 519 Castro Street Suite #100, San Franscisco, CA 94114

GB MANN'S.....

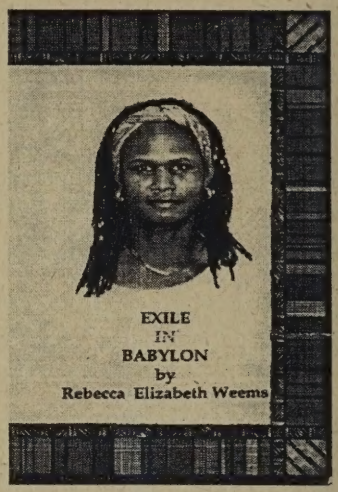
"LOW HANGING FRUIT"

G. B. MANN

GB Mann Los Angeles, based author of Low Hanging fruit makes his debut novel of erotic fiction available through the GLBTAA bookstore. Low Hanging Fruit is only $18.95 is also payable by check or money order. Call 415-487-6618 ext1 for addiional information.....

REBECCA WEEMS

"EXILE IN BABYLON"



Poet, playright, novelist, Rebecca Elizabeth Weems is Editor in Cheif of GLBTAA Voice. Her book of poetry is available from GLBTAA Communications, for $6.00, and can be ordered directly by calling 415-487-6618 ext 1